

Prežih's "Novel from the Days of Upheaval" at the Juncture of National and Social Issues¹

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"What sort of homeland is that, that we shudder at it?... But this homeland ought to be good and just, with enough work and enough bread, and equality ought to reign in it..."² (Prežih 2000: 219–20)

Abstract

Požganica (Burn-field) is the first extended work—more precisely, novel—by Lovro Kuhar-Prežihov Voranc (1893–1950), one of the main representatives of Slovene social realism. The novel was published in 1939. This article takes the position that national and social questions are inextricably linked in *Požganica*. The analysis takes into account (auto)biographical and other relevant facts that previous studies of the novel have pointed to, while also showing that the novel is a literary treatment of an autobiographic story, documentary material, and eye-witness accounts. In the novel, historical events and (auto)biographical experiences more or less lose their factual "character," on account of which its symbolic patterns, images, and depictions become very important. The same is true of the (political) stances the writer expresses. A (plainly) radical socialist stance that would necessarily conform to the author's revolutionary activities is not to be expected in a novel, a literary form. Instead, we find ideologically more acceptable and completely different stances, which contribute to a more complex understanding and representation of the world.

Key words: Lovro Kuhar – Prežihov Voranc, *Požganica*, Carinthian plebiscite, collective novel, literary character, national question, social question

Prežihov Voranc, the pseudonym for Lovro Kuhar (1893–1950), was born to poor peasant parents in Podgora near Kotlje in Carinthia, a region strongly present in all of his works. And he returned there from Italy after WW I, having deserted the Austrian army. In 1919, he went to work at a

¹ This article originated in the context of research program P6–0239, financed by the Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije (Slovenian Research Agency).

² Kakšna neki je ta domovina, da se nam tako skomina po njej?... Ampak ta domovina bi morala biti dobra in pravična, dovolj dela in dovolj kruha bi morala imeti in enakopravnost bi morala vladati v njej...

foundry in Ravne. He had to emigrate in 1930 because of his involvement in the illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia (he lived in a number of European capitals), returning home—that is, to Ljubljana—in 1939. His life during WW II and after was just as eventful. He was again active in the Liberation Front's party organs. He was sent to the concentration camps in Sachenhausen and Mauthausen, from which he returned home "unharméd." Along with Miško Kranjec, Ciril Kosmač, France Bevk, Anton Ingolič, Ivan Potrč, and several others, Prežih is considered one of the chief representatives of Slovene social realism. These writers not only thematized peasant life and the fate of the so-called little man in their works, but introduced images of their native, peripheral regions—that is, in addition to Carinthia, Prekmurje, Styria or Slovenske gorice, and Primorsko or Goriško—into Slovene literature. Appearing in 1939, *Požganica* (Burnfield) is Prežih's first extended work or, more precisely, novel. Until then, he had published short prose, such as the collection *Povesti* (1925). Two novels with collective cores followed: *Doberdob* (1940) and *Jamnica* (1945).

1. Introduction: Regular reprints of *Požganica* (1939) and confirmation of Prežih's place in the literary canon

A "Novel from Days of Upheaval," as Lovro Kuhar-Prežihov Voranc subtitled *Požganica*, has been reprinted eleven times.³ The publishing house Nova založba first brought it out in Ljubljana in 1939 (Ciril Vidmar was the publisher). The second, post-war printing was by the Slovenski knjižni zavod (Ljubljana 1946). The third was ten years later, in 1956, by Cankarjeva založba, edited by Cene Vipotnik and Beno Zupančič (Druškovič 1967: 415–16). The fourth (before the approaching anniversary of the "days of upheaval") was a turning point: it was based on the first, not the second printing, and was a critical edition (volume 6) within Prežih's *Zbrano delo* (Collected works 1967), edited by Drago Druškovič. The same year (with the coming fiftieth anniversary of the end of WW II), Mladinska knjiga published *Požganica* with a brief commentary by Božidar Borko. The Maribor house Obzorja published the novel in 1981 with a commentary by Denis Poniž as part of Prežih's *Izbrana dela* (Selected works). His *Izbrana dela* were also published by Mladinska knjiga in Ljubljana (*Požganica* is volume 2, 1969). Mladinska knjiga was also responsible for the eighth and ninth printings: the 1985 reprint in the Hram series included a commentary by Jože Koruza; the 2000 printing was edited by Iztok Ilich for the collection *Izbrana dela*. In 2004, the publisher DZS brought out *Požganica* in the series Slovenska zgodba. The last printing was by Beletrina, in 2018, with a commentary by the historian Mateja Ratej. The substantial number of reprints of *Požganica*, which were not only connected

³ Translations of the novel would warrant separate consideration.

with anniversaries, point perhaps to the national relevance of its theme even more than to reader interest, and in this regard to the novel's role in representing and affirming national and historical consciousness. At the same time, the regular reprinting contributes to confirming Prežihov Voranc's place in the Slovene literary canon. The impetus for fortifying the novel's place in Slovene readers' consciousness was the 1940 city of Ljubljana's Literary Award (Druškovič 1967: 468).⁴

2. The origins of *Požganica*

Drago Druškovič gave the first and most complete treatment of *Požganica*'s genesis in Prežih's *Zbrana dela*, offering numerous notes and explanations in the manner of a critical, scholarly type of publication. In describing the novel's origins, he adduced many fundamental sources, from the writer's purely personal experiences and encounters to eye-witness material (i.e., second-hand sources) that local participants in the Carinthian struggles provided him, and the ideological and political trends and reasons that necessarily influenced the process of writing. Specifically, he highlighted how the writer lived through the days of revolution from the beginning of spring 1919, when he returned home, to the plebiscite, which took place 10 October 1920.⁵ Among second-hand sources, he highlighted the writer's information gathering from locals about events in the Mežiška Valley immediately following the end of the monarchy in November 1918, which he could not have witnessed himself.⁶ He analyzed Prežih's political involvement, especially with the help of contemporary newspaper articles

⁴ In addition to representatives of the city council, Josip Vidmar represented the PEN Club and Božidar Borko represented the Društvo slovenskih književnikov (Society of Slovene writers). Two prize winners shared fifteen thousand /15.000/ dinars. In addition to Prežih, his contemporary, the Primorsko poet Igor Gruden was named.

⁵ Prežih also met workers and participants in the Carinthian battles more directly in his position as official in the Ravne foundry. Whether he actually met Franjo Malgaj is not known, but it is likely he was in contact with one of the combatants, Milutin Vuga, who told him about his stay in Russia during the October revolution (Vuga was the model for the literary character Vuga in *Požganica*), and with Malgaj's follower Rajko Kotnik, who like the writer was an official at the Bratovska warehouse in the foundry (Druškovič 1967: 422–23).

⁶ Among the most important witnesses was Karel Doberšek. In a commemorative note on an outing with Prežih on 1 May 1930, he recorded how the writer "continually took notes" on everything he told him. Doberšek told Prežih about the excitement in Carinthia after the adoption of the Majniška Declaration, about preparations for the plebiscite, and about the situation in the Mežiška Valley and Pliberk area. We also learn from Doberšek that the same year the writer and priest Franc Ksaver Meško told Prežih about the Carinthian battles when Doberšek and Prežih visited him in Sele (Druškovič 1967: 424).

(Druškovič 1967: 417–18).⁷ Thus, we can divide the sources of the novel into two groups, autobiographical and documentary, to which must be added the author's marked (social) involvement.

2.1 On the relationship between national and social issues in the novel

In his commentary on *Požganica*, the editor, Druškovič, also repeatedly pointed to the symbiotic relationship between the national and social in Prežih's work. He based this dual sensibility and preoccupation in particular on descriptions of the author's life from 1920, 1939, 1946, and 1963, citing, among other things, the following words of his: "My father was a Slovene nationalist, and so from my earliest youth I was, too. Early on this characteristic of mine took on a strong coloring of a socio-revolutionary nature" (Druškovič 1967: 418). He thus explains Prežih's socio-national consciousness first of all by family heritage—more precisely, the paternal upbringing that on the one hand instilled resistance to Austria because of its national egotism as seen in the repression of Carinthian Slovenes, and on the other resistance to the (old) feudal social order that depended on the possession of inherited privileges and socially repressed the employed (peasant and worker), predominantly Slovene stratum. Prežih's attachment to his native Carinthia in both the national and social senses was at least as strongly inculcated by his encounter with utraquist, Slovene-denying, and Germanizing schooling, and, at the start of the twentieth century, increasingly German promoting pressure (Druškovič 1967: 447), as well as his experience as a political refugee between the wars. He spent time in foreign prisons on account of his revolutionary activity in the worker's movement—he began *Požganica* while in police custody in Vienna's

⁷ Among the publications connected with *Požganica*'s ideological content, the editor of Prežih's *Zbrana dela* first cites the article "Položaj v Mežiški dolini" (The situation in the Mežiška Valley), in the newspaper *Ujedinjenje*, April 1920, in which Prežih reports on laborers' demands for the count's lands, raising the questions of their social and national struggles (the laborers were mostly Slovene), on the Mežiška Valley workers' resistance—following the regime change, they settled accounts with their exploiters—and on factions within the industrial proletariat (Druškovič 1967: 426–28). The editor further cites Prežih's publications in *Rdeči prapor*, in which he wrote about all of the strata of peasants and workers in the Mežiška Valley and bemoaned the "pseudo-socialist" activities of both the Yugoslav or Slovene and Austrian parties based on their adherence to bourgeois nationalist thinking (Druškovič 1967: 428–34).

Rossauerlande prison in 1936 and 1937⁸—and “bummed around” European capitals—for example, Paris⁹ and Moscow (Druškovič 1967: 447).

We might well speculate that his strong attachment to his native region and interest in the Carinthian Slovene ethnic minority and its social conditions were intensely nurtured by his long detachment from home and yearning for his homeland. Since these issues came to a head exactly during the time of revolution, it is understandable why they so “burdened” the writer then and why he returned to them later. He wrote about secretly crossing the line of demarcation at Strojna in a news report entitled “Ob versajskih plotovih” (About Versailles fencing, 1940), and in the article “Trinajsta obletnica koroškega plebiscita” (The thirteenth anniversary of the Carinthian plebiscite, 1933) he repeated his stance on the question of the Slovene ethnic minority, which only a revolution could resolve: “It will resolve it so that there will be no more ethnic oppression, equality will reign, national chauvinism will be eliminated, and the Slovene and German peoples will live together in peace in Carinthia,” he wrote (Druškovič 1967: 447).

Whether praising or faulting the new novel, critics also pointed out the intertwining of the two issues. For example, Ivo Brnčič in the review *Ljubljanski zvon* (1939) underlined “the description of a unique intertwining of social and national questions” as a feature of *Požganica*. In his view, it was generally one of the defining characteristics of Prežih’s writing (Druškovič 1967: 466). In a later review for the newspaper *Slovenec* (by then the novel had been reprinted once), Tine Debeljak (1959) wrote that *Požganica* was a “veritable epic of a collective nature, national and social,” but since his convictions differed, the social model seemed to him incorrectly depicted. This is evident where he judged that in the novel “the veil of national greatness [is ripped off of] our glorious history and the entire feat is depicted in the light of social backwardness as a struggle against the social revolution that Prežihov Voranc and people like him desire instead of a national revolution” (Druškovič 1967: 465–66). Nonetheless, he did not deny the novel’s importance in the arc of Slovene narrative prose’s development.

Later literary historical treatments that accompanied reprints of *Požganica* could not avoid the social and national model, although it was not their main subject. This is particularly true of Jože Koruza (1985) and Denis Poniž (1981), who deal with Prežih’s understanding of the novel genre. Koruza was interested in the formation of a “collective novel,” so he

⁸ Druškovič rejects Fran Albreht’s memoir entry of 1955, in which he says the novel started to take shape already around 1930 (1967: 419–20).

⁹ Prežih told the editor of the *Zbrana dela* that he was literally writing in Parisian coffee houses during the time he had between meetings.

analyzed separate narrative threads (narrator, narrated personages, composition, symbolizing and lyricizing the narrative, and folkloric elements); Poniž poses the question of “what becomes of the novel in Voranc’s hands and especially the text of *Požganica*” (1981: 437). He sums up the writer’s position that at the heart of the novel are “elements of the historical, social, and national questions of the Carinthian Slovenes’ fate” (1981: 440), but is most interested in how the novel is constructed and what roles individual novelistic elements play. Somewhat differently than Koruza, who sees Petruh as the dominant character in the novel (1985: 515), Poniž, in treating Prežih’s concept of the protagonist, asserts that *Požganica* is without an individual (it could be Močivski Petruh) or collective (it could be Jazbina) protagonist, but that the protagonists are Carinthian Slovenes. Besides the nature of the protagonist, he devotes special attention to narrative perspective (1981: 442–44). He draws attention to the tension in Prežih “between the demands of writing a novel and the demands of the national and historical context and period,” due to which so-called “literary or artistic, linguistic, and formally innovative dimensions” must be given lesser consideration (1981: 445–46). Nonetheless, he finds that *Požganica* is far from a (simply) social realist novel, and that it departs from the type in many respects. He further perceives in it certain features of modernism (e.g., complexity of the action, irony, playfulness, and a Rabelaisian parabola) and the symbolist tradition (the chapter about Močivski Petruh and the white goose) that distance the novel from being a defense of the nation (1981: 446–50).

3. Modeling the relationship between national and social emancipation in *Požganica*

This examination is based on the presupposition that national and social issues are integrally intertwined in *Požganica*. (Auto)biographic and other relevant facts adduced by previous studies are preserved in the analysis, while at the same time greater attention is given to the fact that the novel is a literary treatment of an autobiographical story, documentary material (i.e., the writer’s inquiries), and testimony. For this reason, historical events and (auto)biographical experiences can to some degree lose their factual “nature” in the novel, and their symbolic patterns, images, and representations become instead more important. The same is true of Prežih the literary author voicing (political) positions in places in the novel as a literary form where (straightforward) radical socialist positions and “hot bloodedness” conforming to his revolutionary activity are out of place. He rather includes more ideologically admissible and in general opposing positions as well, leading to a more complex apprehension and representation of the world.

Literary characters are one of the fundamental components of a narrative and as such can state positions; therefore, we will first look at how in *Požganica* Prežih addresses and/or resolves the national and social emancipation issues through different perspectives and viewpoints, which run from the so-called objective or auctorial narrator to the purely (personal) viewpoints of individual narrators (cf. Koruza 1985: 514–15). In other words, how does Prežih fashion the relationship between the two issues through the course of the entire novel. It is worth noting that in *Požganica*, which is structurally a collective novel, certain characters notably stand out. They have roles as leaders in parts of the novel and as such they communicate national and social strategies.

Požganica begins with the viewpoint of the character Močivski Petruh, coloring the narrative from the outset with a subjective awareness. The place where we visually and aurally apprehend the physical world from Petruh's position reads like this:

For several days it had been as if Močivski Petruh were sitting on embers. He couldn't stay in one place, he couldn't find peace anywhere and he took no real joy in his work. For a week he had been putting up hay for the winter but he was getting nowhere. Again and again he would get up, nervously listen in the distance, stick out his neck, and steal looks through the firs. The entire forest surroundings were somehow oppressively quiet, like hellebore, the fall colors increased the oppressiveness and a person's heart shrank at it.¹⁰ (Prežih 2000: 7)

The disquiet and oppressiveness are not only a reflection of experience and mood, but clearly hint at people's nervousness and their coming social awakening. Further on, Petruh's view will be prominent in individual chapters, and because of this it is important for interpreting the relationship between social and national emancipation in the novel.

In addition to Petruh, many other characters emerge from the action in the opening chapter. They are Repežev Rok, Naraglavški Anzuh, Karpuhov Šantač, and, not least, the people, who in chapters 2 and 3 ("Medvladje" [Interregnum] and "Na prelomnici" [At the breaking point]) are at the center of the action. Repežev Rok appears after the priest at Mass tries to get the congregants to sign up for military bonds. Repežev Rok

¹⁰ Močivski Petruh je bil že nekaj dni tak, kot bi sedel na žerjavici. Nikjer ga ni držalo, nikjer ni našel miru in do dela ni imel nobenega pravega veselja. Že teden dni je napravljajl steljo za zimo, a ni prišel nikamor. Znova in znova je postajal, nemirno prisluškoval v daljavo, stegoval vrat in škilil skozi smrečje. Vsa lesnata okolica je bila nekam tesnobno tiha, talovna, jesenske barve so to tesnobo še večale in ob njej se je človeku stiskalo srce.

speaks against the bonds, and as a former soldier welcomes peace, and by so doing directly opposes international conflicts.

“My dear fellow parishioners, listen up to the voice of your soldiers who spilled their blood for four years in Galicia, Doberdob, and Piava! Don’t sign up for any more bonds! We soldiers ask you not to! Enough of all this! Whoever buys war bonds supports war and is for continuing the killing, hunger... Don’t listen to the pastor, don’t obey anyone! An end to war bonds! Let there be peace!...”¹¹ (Prežih 2000: 10)

Neither does Naraglavški Anzuh want the war to go on. He returned from the front and acts as Repežev’s second. He, too, speaks up for peace and opposes the continuing oppression of the nation.

In the meantime, at Petruh’s house, Karphuhov Šantač calls the people from Močivje—that is, the village of Jazbina, to rebel. Social injustices anger him. Šantač calls for the working class to “awake” and turns to Petruh, saying, “Just yawn if you like, ha, ha, ha! People of Močivje, now your time has come! A dawn is coming for all of us... a dawn for Jazbina...” (Prežih 2000: 13). Like Petruh in the opening, Šantač’s disquiet is a sign of oncoming social conflicts between the working and upper classes and the people’s impending rebellion. And they do awaken on the background of Austria-Hungary’s break up and at the threshold of days of revolution:

The Mežica Valley hummed like a disturbed wasps’ nest; groups in the streets and in yards were becoming larger, yelling and milling around the houses or remaining threateningly silent. No one gave a thought to the damp autumn cold, to the drizzle from the sky, no one paid attention to the mud that slopped up to your knees.¹² (Prežih 2000: 17)

The face of the crowd are local (hired) peasants and exploited woodcutters and miners with their wives and children. With the help of Petruh’s group, Repežev Rok, Naraglavški Anzuh and the miner Kordež, they first fall upon a merchant, the German sympathizer Gnida, and Tepan, the commander of “gendarme officers.” In this way, the opposing camps of the profiteering

¹¹ “Dragi moji farani, poslušajte zdaj glas svojega soldata, ki že štiri leta preliva kri po Galiciji, po Doberdobu in po Piavi! Ne podpisujte več vojnega posojila! – Mi soldati vas za to prosimo! Dosti je vsega! Kdor da za vojno posojilo, ta podpira vojno, ta je za to, da se nadaljuje morija, lakota ... Ne poslušajte fajmoštra, ne ubogajte nikogar! Proč z vojnim posojilom! Živio mir! ...”

¹² Mežica je šumela kot razdražen osji mehur; po cestah, po dvoriščih so postajale vedno večje skupine, ki so se ali kričavo prerivale med hišami ali pa grozeče molčale. Nihče ni mislil na vlažni jesenski mraz, na pršeče nebo, nihče se ni zmenil za blato, ki se ti je udiralo do kolen.

class (usurers, merchants, tavern keepers) versus the people and their most prominent representatives are for the first time shown in the novel.

The conflictive social relations that arise from the opposition between them—the peasants and workers and the profiteering class (including those associated with the administration and teachers)—can partly be recast as a question of national emancipation, because the opposition between the local, Slovene and foreign sides—the latter represented by the Germans and German sympathizers—is also indicated.

A stratum of national “traitors” prevents a simple division into locals and foreigners. Throughout the novel, German sympathizers are not depicted tendentiously (and artificially). Rather, Prežih attempts to analyze their role in the broader context of social relations. He locates the reasons for their behavior—from the perspective of the idea of Slovene nationalism vs. betrayal—in the socio-political context on both the Austrian and Yugoslav or Slovene sides, neither of which can adequately resolve the workers’ and peasants’ issues. This is also one of the ways in which the national conflict, which is second to class struggle, is attenuated in the novel. Among the personages who find themselves somewhere between the national sides is, for example, the tavern keeper Janko, a one-time hewer in the mine, who was exempted from military service. He is a social democrat by conviction, and workers are drawn to him (regardless of national differences). As the text progresses (e.g., in the chapter “Medvldje”), representatives of Carinthian Slovene inhabitants are arrayed on both sides as regards their social standing: on the side of the profiteers are, for example, the merchant Trobej, the peddler Savnik, the baker, and the miller; on the side of the exploited miners are, for example, Ozim and the woodcutters Jakuš and Pasterk. This reduces sharp language and national differences, which allows us to appreciate the importance of social conflict.

Social conflict is shown in the novel on many levels. While the crowd is depicted in all of its turmoil, the question of responsible and moral behavior arises in individual cases. Petruh is overwhelmed by fear of himself when Gnida is attacked; he asks himself whether he should do something (Prežih 2000: 38). It is an indication of moral and ethical reasoning, which elevates him above the crowd. All the same, he is overcome by “terrible hate” when he enters Gnida’s house on account of the wrongs the latter has committed:

When Petruh, Šantač, Pasterk, and several other companions entered Gnida’s house, he was suddenly overcome by a terrible hate; all of the wrongs Gnida had done to his family awoke in his memory. He saw his mother, hands folded,

before the powerful man, begging him: “Leave us the cow, at least leave us milk!”¹³ (Prežih 2000: 41).

Action must follow his ethical idea. In the same place, the image and example of the good, just, and wise King Matjaž is evoked, who will right wrongs and defend the subjugated from power. Thus, once again in the novel the issues of social and national equality are symbolically joined together. The “crowd’s tempest” leads to the killing of Gnida.

The ideology of social emancipation becomes more prominent in chapter 3, with the telling title “Na prelomnici”, in which the mass of people assumes the main role. Thunder and wind more powerful than the din from mining and farming tools are images for the people. The chapter begins:

A storm of people rushed through the Mežica Valley for three days; until now motorized hammers pounded in the foundries, fans roared, sirens wailed, saws and circular saws screeched; now all of that clamor and din had died down of a sudden, and a much more powerful thundering than before was born. It was the thundering of the people that flowed from the foundries, from the parcels, from the valleys, from the dells, off of the slopes and ridges... Like a wild whirlwind, the scent of freedom rushed down the valley. The poor throng drew it in through its wide open, flaring nostrils, sucked it in and became drunk on its dewy sweetness.¹⁴ (Voranc 2000: 58)

A “spirit of unity” seized the workers and peasants. The workers especially join the social democratic party, which is headed by the hewer and land owner Pipan in Guštanj (Ravne), and Maklin in the Mežica Valley (Voranc 2000: 62–). Meanwhile, the miners in Leše rise up and demand the foreman Gabun to take over the mine in their name (Voranc 2000: 69).

In the “poor throng’s” crisis situation (Prežih 2000: 76), and with the remains of the old Austrian powers, represented by the *Bürgergarde*, the

¹³ Ko je Petruh s Šantačem, s Pasterkom in še nekaj znanci stopil v Gnidovo hišo, ga je nenadoma obšlo hudo sovraštvo; njegov spomin je obudil vse krivice, ki jih je Gnida storil njegovi družini. Videl je mater, ki je s sklenjenimi rokami stala pred tem mogočnejšem in ga prosila: “Pustite nam kravo, pustite nam vsaj mleko!”

¹⁴ Po dolini Mežice je tri dni drvel ljudski vihar; doslej so razbijala po fužinah parna kladiva, grmeli so ventilatorji, tulile sirene, cvilile žage in cirkularke, zdaj je ves ta hrušč in trušč zamrl, kakor bi odrezal, a rodil se je mnogo silnejši grom od prejšnjega. To je bil grom ljudstva, ki se je razlegal iz fužin, iz revirjev, iz dolin, iz globač, z bregov in slemen... Senca svobode je kot divja jaga hušknila po dolini. Uboga gmajna jo je vsrkavala skozi svoje široko odprte, hlastne nozdrvi, srkala in se opijanila z njeno rosno sladkostjo.

regional leaders of the Slovene side (chapter 4 is symbolically entitled "Rojenice," female beings that in Slovene mythology foretold one's fate at birth) make a move, secretly meeting in the tavernkeeper Oset's house. The Prevalje pastor Rep, the priest Mvačnik, and co-conspirators Lešnik, Županc, and Abraham agree that after the declaration of a government of national unity in Ljubljana, they will organize a national guard and take power. Oset thinks that it is necessary to win over workers who are "mushy, German influenced nationalists," so that they assure social democrats and labor delegates representation in the national council (Prežih 2000: 80–81). Once again through his character the question of a solution for the Carinthian Slovene inhabitants is raised, one that requires resolution of their social as well as national situation. It resonates through the entire novel.

In interpreting the relationship between the national and social issues, the figure of Pastor Rep attracts attention. He is little present in the novel, but his function as spiritual leader of the parish is important. In the chapter about the miller Lušin, he is suggestively presented through the eyes of his parishioners:

He didn't exude that inspiring parish warmth that we often see in the countryside, nor did he stand out as a preacher or have much to do with devout virgins. He was hard, a silent official who knew not only how to skillfully manage the large parish property, but just as skillfully shepherded the souls of his parish, which had a very tricky social make up... No one loved him, everyone feared him in a different way. The peasants had their fill of him, because he placed a burdensome new municipal tax on them to build a new rectory, most workers couldn't stand him, because his organizations undercut and weakened their political power, the Germans didn't like him because of his Slovene national impulses, the assistant pastors, because of his strictness—and everyone, because they couldn't touch him.¹⁵ (Prežih 2000: 96–97)

¹⁵ Iz njega ni odsevala tista zaupljiva farovška toplota, ki jo često srečamo na deželi, tudi pridigar ni bil poseben ter se tudi s pobožnimi devicami ni preveč ukvarjal. Bil je trd, uradniško molčeč, ki ni znal le spretno upravljati veliko farovško imetje, temveč je prav tako spretno znal pasti duše svoje fare, ki je imela zelo kočljiv socialni sestav. [...] Nihče ga ni ljubil, vsak se ga je pa po svoje bal. Kmetje so ga imeli v želodcu zaradi tega, ker jim je z zidanjem novega farovža nakopal hudo občinsko novico, večina delavstva ga ni marala, ker je s svojimi organizacijami rovaril med njimi in slabil njihovo politično moč, nemčurji zaradi njegove slovenske narodne nepomirljivosti, kaplani zaradi njegove strogosti – vsi pa zaradi tega, ker mu niso mogli nikjer do živega.

Rep, who is known as a sort of inconspicuous leader of the Slovene faction, is not an extreme nationalist. He seems to the parishioners distant and unpleasant, which is the result of his recognition of his parish's social make up, in which the peasants and workers are almost equally powerful and there are a good number of wealthy people, and in which the Slovene, German sympathizing, and social democrat parties are in constant conflict. For this reason, he does not cast himself as a supporter of Slovene organizations. Amidst the tensions between the different parties, the pastor plays a role that is extremely calming in both respects—the national and social.

As regards modeling the relationship between the social and national issues, the character of the chief forester Dudaš is prominent among those who enable Prežih to create a very complex (novelistic) representation of the world. Dudaš is a Sudeten German who manages the Mušenik territory, where he has numerous laborers, lumberjacks, and sawyers under him. Although he, too, is physically present relatively little, he is felt throughout by the fear of his subordinates. He is only mentioned in the first chapter, but it is clear he is a strict and unforgiving superior. In the chapter “Oskimina” (in the first part of the novel), we learn about a labor revolt and his arrest by members of the national guard, who take him off to the Ljubljana castle. In the second part of the novel (in the chapter “Prva partija” [The first match], we not only see his return to Mušenik, but also his “development” or “switching” to the side of his one-time class and national enemies. There is little doubt his behavior is opportunistic, since he joins the social democratic party to save his position. Yet with his formative immigrant experience, he at the same time comes to a broader, meaningful recognition of the intractability of single-minded national extremism, due to which he twice was forced to leave his home in Carinthia:

the first time [was] last autumn, when the national guard took him off to the Ljubljana castle like a thief, the second time almost four months ago, when the *Volkswehr* was fleeing the Mežiška Valley. After that he wandered around Šentvid like a minority German, an emigrant, and around Celovec when it was taken from the Yugoslav forces under Italian pressure. At that time, he lost his appetite for being a minority German for his whole life.¹⁶ (Prežih 2000: 334)

¹⁶ prvič [torej] lanske jeseni, ko ga je narodna straža odvedla na ljubljanski grad kot talca, drugič pa skoraj pred štirimi meseci, ko je *Volkswehr* bežala iz Mežiške doline. Potem se je kot neodrešen Nmec, kot emigrant potepal po Šentvidu, in ko je bil Celovec na italijanski pritisk odvzet jugoslovanskim četam, po Celovcu. V tem času se je neodrešenega nemštva najedel za vse življenje.

When he "switches," the chief forester immediately loses all apparent signs of being German: the paintings of the Austrian and German emperors, membership cards for *Südmarka* and *Schulverein*, and even the rack of antlers with engraved Frankfurt colors (Prežih 2000: 335–36), because other colors are displayed in the valley now—those of the Slovene tricolor.

After Dudaš's arrest (in the chapter "Oskimina"), Senior Lieutenant Franjo Malgaj and the local legionnaire and corporal Kotnik enter the grounds of the castle in Ravne, once the summer residence of Count Thurn. Malgaj is unhappy with orders to commence interrogating detainees, while Kotnik opposes interrogations because he thinks that the crowd was not detained for their greed but for centuries of oppression and humiliation (Prežih 2000: 121). Early one morning a patrol brings Petruh in. He finds himself before Malgaj and Kotnik, who try to force from him a false confession that he killed Gnida. In order to avoid a trial and execution, he becomes one of Malgaj's men (Prežih 2000: 130–43).¹⁷

Prežih uses the character of Malgaj, a nationally conscientious lieutenant in Maister's army who must interrogate Slovene rebels, in a special way to devalue uncritical national pride. When he depicts the disagreement between the senior lieutenant and the corporal, he also shows all of the leadership's confusion. We can read Petruh's avoidance of a trial as implicit criticism of the authorities.

Directly afterwards, in the collectively titled chapter "Jazbina," the writer displays further pointed criticism. In the case of the "unsettled account" the Jazbina residents have with the authorities, he levels criticism at the political and administrative branches of the old and new regimes. He shows the poor people's pathetic fight for Požganica, which was once the "Jazbina commons, the common property of all twenty farmers for grazing, for wood, and for hunting"¹⁸ (Prežih 2000: 149). It is a sort of symbol for "old justice" in the novel. The duplicitous government agent Požeg assures Jazbina's residents that the new country of Yugoslavia will take care of everything; at a hearing in Pliberk, a judge promises them that he will consult with officials; and a bureaucrat reads from old tax records that the county administration declared Požganica its property and that their old feudal rights are not recorded. It is no different after the Slovene occupation of Carinthia (the chapter "Požganica zaživi [Požganica comes alive]). At that point the count's huntsman Nadlar returns to Požganica; Pupis, who is sent by the regional government, becomes the new temporary overseer of Thurn's estates, and the Jazbina residents receive nothing from the pastor or

¹⁷ This is one of the central chapters. It is entitled "Petruh postane legionar" (Petruh becomes a legionnaire).

¹⁸ Jazbinska gmajna, skupna last vseh dvajsetih gospodarjev za pašo, za les, za lov.

social democratic party, whose chairman went over to the *Volkswehr*, but instead are left emptyhanded.

The case of the legal wrangling over the Jazbina commons is probably the most completely developed connection between the national and social issues, and the ironically treated confusion on the part of the leaders and those in authority in general. The people expect a resolution of both issues, but the authorities do not have an answer to them. While nationalisms urge violence and organizations and parties' (Slovene and Austrian) social policies do not manage to solve the peasants and workers' problems, the socialist parties' policies are just as flawed, leading to erosion of nationality.

For this reason, Prežih must critically "settle accounts" with both Rožej and Petruh, although differently, and thereby neutralize the acute opposition of the parties represented by the two "main characters" and arrives in the novel at a sort of moral conciliation. Petruh's cousin Klemen Rožej¹⁹ decides to join the side of the *Heimatschutz* organization, which unites German political parties in order to seize power in Carinthia and organize a defense against the culturally backwards and barbarian Yugoslavia. He is one of the young proletarians under German cultural influence who wish to live in an Austrian republic. In the novel, he must experience disappointment, and it is at the point when he learns who is exploiting the workers—those who by conviction are fanatical German nationalists (e.g., Florijan Gröger, the leader of the Carinthian social democratic party). Further, the writer saddles Klemen with the heavy burdens of a guilty conscience and doubt as to whether he acted correctly. When the *Volkswehr* led by Steinacher, later the leader of the national socialist organizations of Germans abroad, occupies Grobar peak, surrounding the Slovene forces, Klemen is killed.

Močivski Petruh likewise "plucks death from *Požganica*'s narrative fabric" (Koruza 1985: 517), only in Prežih's work, death is "pronounced in the symbolic tradition" (Poniž 1981: 447). Before dying, the wounded Petruh sees a white goose with a golden key in a vision. It could save his Jazbina home (Prežih 2000: 231). Jože Koruza writes (1985: 517) that Petruh continues to function as one of the prominent characters despite his physical disappearance from the novel's action.²⁰ And Denis Poniž sees in his death "saving and resolving meaning... for Jazbina and the people of Jazbina, as well as a resolving image" (1981: 447). A resolution is only alluded to, because Petruh cannot carry out his vision, which he puts

¹⁹ For more on this, see the chapters "Mravljinci" and "Rožej pobegne v Celovec" (Rožej flees to Celovec).

²⁰ Koruza concludes that the writer put the chapter "Močivskemu Petruhu se pokaže bela gos" exactly at the center of *Požganica*, because it marks the beginning of the second half of the novel (1985: 516).

down in a letter to people at home. It contains "an end to German rule," with Slovenes as "lords in their own land" (Prežih 2000: 227–28).

The myth of homeland and patriotism is in fact questioned or at least devalued. In the same, central chapter, Kordež, in the Vuga company of Malgaj's guards destroys it when he (soberly) asks:

"What the heck is this homeland that it makes us shudder like that? The homeland, a marvelous thing! Look, I'm a worker, a miner. My father is a lumberjack, and my grandfather was a peasant's son from Topla. I really don't have a homeland; I find my homeland where I find work. We are our own homeland, we carry it in our hands, in our hearts... They call me a socialist, Malgaj and Kotnik even call me a Bolshevik... Fine—if I am, I am! But despite that, even if they criticize me for that, I still have a sense of homeland. But that homeland would have to be good and just, it would have to have enough work and enough bread and equality would have to rule in it..."²¹ (Prežih 2000: 219–20)

This is a bitter realization that "paupers" on both sides of the Krka River are fighting for a homeland, and on both sides are peasants and workers. On account of this the idea of patriotism is diminished.

This is true as well for the chapter "Granictal poseže vmes" (Granictal intervenes), "which surprises not only with its irony and playfulness, but most of all with its Rabelaisian parabolic nature, retreat from any sort of national, defensive, and enlightening pose" (Poniž 1981: 446). The male servants with comical names (Švedrasti Miha, Motl, Anderle, Tiče, Gregl, Jorgl, Johan in Foltel) at the Benedictine monastery in Šentpavel in the Laboška Valley march into Ruda and join the Austrian forces.

The name of the teacher Buzaron (archaic *buzaronski* 'vexing', *hentani* 'darn'; folk *hrdamani* 'damn' in the sense of *hudimanov* 'devilish' with an expressive qualifier) functions comically or rather threateningly humorously. He enters the action in the second-to-the-last chapter trying to entice laborers into yet another, Independent Peasant party with his "pseudo-socialism" and "pseudo-nationalism."

²¹ Kakšna neki je ta domovina, da se nam tako skomina po njej?... Domovina, prečudna stvar! Poglejte, delavec sem, rudar. Moj oče je drvar, a moj ded je bil kmetiški sin iz Tople. Pravzaprav nimam domovine; kjer najdem delo, tam najdem tudi domovino. Mi smo samim sebi domovina, nosimo jo na rokah, v srcu... Imajo me za socialista, Malgaj in Kotnik me imata celo za boljševika... Dobro – če sem pa sem! Toda kljub temu, čeprav mi to očitajo, imam le čut za domovino. Ampak ta domovina bi morala biti dobra in pravična, dovolj dela in dovolj kruha bi morala imeti in enakopravnost bi morala vladati v njej...

And what does the ending tell us? The authorities send troops to Jazbina to disarm its inhabitants, because in the meantime they have without permission organized a bonfire on the Požganica in order to show it is still theirs. On the eve of the plebiscite, Repežev Rok and Naraglavški Anzuh arrive in Sinča and continue on to Velikovec. Karpuhov Šantač, Kordež, Paster, and Maklin join them, and together they go to Petruh's grave in Želinje.

They soon found Petruh's grave in the small Želinje cemetery. Although he had been buried in a corner for suicides, the grave was very nicely fenced and full of plants and flowers. On the crude wooden cross without a name hung a large dried wreath with a faded Slovene tricolor woven through it. At the sight of the lonely grave, all were taken by a deep grief; one after the other they removed their hats and knelt down. They prayed a holy, inaudible prayer through pressed lips... The only ones who said nothing were Repežev Rok and Karpuhov Šantač. The former stood silently at the grave for a long time, then took the red heather bouquet from Jazbina mountains from his hat and placed it on the grave; the latter immediately bent over, pulled a small frond of dried greens from the grave and stuck it in his hat...²² (Prežih 2000: 425–26)

4. Conclusion

In the novel, the author uses counterpoint, combining multiple individual viewpoints and offering a broad view of the social and class situations of Carinthian inhabitants and their national or homeland identity. He thereby avoids simplistic answers and allows different voices and views of the questions to develop independently. This also invalidates one-sided interpretations of the novel. We can, however, conclude that understanding the person in Prežih's work requires addressing both issues, the national and social.

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²² Na malem želinjskem pokopališču so kmalu našli Petruhov grob. Čeprav so ga bili pokopali v kotu za samomorilce, je bil grob zelo lepo oplet in poln zelenja in rož. Na lesenem zasilnem križu brez napisa je visel velik, že posušen venec, prepleten z obledelo slovensko trobojnico. Ob pogledu na ta samotni grob je vse prevzela globoka tegobnost; drug za drugim so sneli klobuke in poklekali. S stisnjenimi ustnicami so molili sveto, neslišno molitev... Edina, ki nista nič rekla, sta bila Repežev Rok in Karpuhov Šantač. Prvi je dolgo časa nemo stal ob grobu, potem pa je snel s klobuka rdečo kitico vresja z jazbinskih planin in jo položil na grob; drugi se je koj nato sklonil, odtrgal vejico posušenega zelenja na grobu in si jo zataknil za klobuk.

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POVZETEK

**PREŽIŽHOV "ROMAN IZ PREV RATNIH DNI"
V PREPLETU NARODNOSTNEGA IN SOCIALNEGA VPRAŠANJA**

Požganica je prvo obsežnejše delo, natančneje, roman, Lovra Kuharja – Prežihovega Voranca (1893–1950), ki velja za enega od osrednjih predstavnikov slovenskega socialnega realizma. Roman je izšel leta 1939. Razprava izhaja s stališča, da se v Požganici narodnostno in socialno vprašanje med seboj neločljivo prepletata. Pri analizi upoštevamo (avto)biografska in druga relevantna dejstva, na katera so opozorile doslejšnje obravnave romana, vendar prav tako pokažemo, da gre pri romanu za literarizacijo avtobiografske zgodbe, dokumentarizma in pričevanj. V romanu zgodovinski dogodki in (avto)biografske izkušnje potemtakem bolj ali manj izgubljajo svojo dejstveno »naravo«, zaradi česar postajajo pomembnejši njihovi simbol(istič)ni vidiki, podobe in predstave. Enako velja za pisateljevo izražanje (političnih) stališč. V romanu kot literarni formi tako ne gre pričakovati (zgolj) radikalnih socialističnih stališč, ki bi se nujno skladala z njegovo revolucionarno dejavnostjo, temveč tudi ideološko bolj popustljiva in sploh drugačna stališča, ki prispevajo h kompleksnejšemu umevanju in predstavljanju sveta.

Skozi natančno analizo pokažemo, kako pisatelj v Požganici kontrapunktično, tj. na način kombiniranja več samostojnih gledišč, ponudi širok pogled na vprašani socialno-razrednega položaja koroškega življa in

njegove narodnostne oz. domovinske identitete. S tem ko se izogiba enoznačnim odgovorom in pusti, da se različni glasovi in stališča k zastavljenima vprašanjema samostojno razvijajo, pa tudi onemogoča enoznačna tolmačenja romana. Prežihov človek vselej naslavlja obe vprašanji, narodnostno in socialno torej.